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ABSTRACT

Intended for parents, this guide discusses the effects of standardized tests on children, using test items from recent standardized reading tests which have been administered to children aged 7 to 13 and children's responses to these items. For each item, comments are made about the ambiguity of the item: the various interpretations that can be applied to item content, influencing the answer; measurement of knowledge content rather than reading ability; test makers' biases; or confusing language and format. The authors comment about the effects of these tests: (1) class placement and labeling; (2) pressure on teachers to coach students for the tests; (3) negative effects on curriculum; (4) costs of improving reading programs, based mainly on test scores; (5) effect on children's self-concept; and (6) reaction of parents to their children, based on test scores. (MH)

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STANDARDIZED READING TESTS

Reading Tests

DO THEY HELP OR HURT YOUR CHILD

LOOK INSIDE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR CHILD AND STANDARDIZED TESTS

All the items in this booklet are from actual standardized tests used in the past few years to test 7 to 13 year old children in reading.

The frequency of a sound determines its—
1 treble 3 pitch
2 volume 4 harmony 23 ① ② ③ ④

20

- Sally is smaller than Joe.
- Sally is bigger than Joe.
- Joe is bigger than Sally.

The test questions in this booklet are typical of those found on the usual commercial standardized reading tests—MAT, CTBS, SAT. References to children's responses come from interviews with children in schools that use standardized reading tests.

When teachers give a test, they hope that all the children will pass. Then they will know that the children have learned what has been taught to them.

But the people who make standardized tests design them so that half the children must "fail" (score below "grade level"). Remember, "grade level" is simply the middle score—half must always be above and half below.

It's very difficult, using a group paper-and-pencil test, to measure a child's reading ability without confusing it with the child's unique background, special knowledge, thinking ability and cultural heritage. The specific skill of reading gets lost in the confusion.

Surely the school has an obligation to teach your child to read and show you how well your child is doing. The test items in this booklet demonstrate that standardized tests do not do this effectively.

As you go through this booklet try the test items for yourself. This will increase your understanding of the difficulties.

Are these pictures clear? Do they have "correct" answers?

☐ Jane helps Mother look for her umbrella.

☐ Mother is cleaning the house all by herself.

☐ Mother thinks Jane is under the table.

Maria answered: "Jane helps her mother look for her umbrella."
The testmaker had something else in mind.

Does this prove that Maria cannot read?

☐ The boy helps the goat pull the cart through the gate.

☐ The gate is open so the boy and goat can go through.

☐ The boy got out of the wagon and closed the gate.

Is the drawing here clear enough so that you can be sure your answer is correct? If you are not, is this because your reading is at fault?

Are the "correct" answers always the best ones?

To **keep** means to..... ○ carry ○ hold

After the test, Derrick said, "When I want to **keep** something, **I carry** it."

"No," said Yvette, "when I want to **keep** something, I **hold** it."

A **giant** is always ..... ○ huge ○ fierce ○ mean ○ scary

The correct answer is **huge.** But if children pick **scary,** does that mean that they are "wrong" or that they can't read **huge, fierce,** or **mean?** or **giant?**

II. Choose the word that **best** completes each sentence.

A sage individual is

5. touchy
6. old
7. testy
8. wise

Mark selected "old" to complete the sentence.

The testmaker's answer was "wise". What was actually wanted was a synonym though this was never stated in the instructions.

These items are from word knowledge subtests. All the children above clearly knew the meaning of the words in question. Yet, some of the children received low scores and some high scores because they differed in the way they reasoned or because their experiences were not the same.

He stepped clumsily off the bottom step onto the world of tomorrow. His heart raced. What bigger step had man ever taken? His words, echoing his thoughts, came clearly out of millions of television speakers all over the world. "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind!" Indeed, the entire world held its breath as Neil Alden Armstrong became the first human to set foot on the moon.

He paused and remembered the teen-ager who received his pilot's license on his sixteenth birthday, even before he received a driver's license. He recalled the Korean War and the seventy-eight missions he had flown for the U.S. Navy. Then he remembered his training in aeronautical engineering and the experimental aircraft he had flown, including the X-15 rocket plane.

Other memories flashed by: being chosen the first non-military astronaut and carrying out the first docking of two orbiting spacecraft. Now he was the first mortal to touch the moon. He blinked and focused on the strange scenery in front of him. It was time to take the next step.

30 Which of these words best describes Armstrong's space career?

5 long

6 reckless

7 thoughtful

8 adventurous

10 year old Sarah said, "He's had a **long** career and now he's thinking back on it. See he learned to fly before he was 16."

Fred Said: "It's **reckless**. He took lots of chances. He never worried about anything. He's like that man we read about who liked to climb mountains because he liked thrills.

Diane said, "**Adventurous** because this reminds me of Star Trek which is an adventure story."

Did any one child do a better job reading this?

Some days I should stay in bed. Today was one of those days.

"Good morning," Mom said. "Don't you have a clean shirt to wear? That one looks dirty."

"Sam," said Dad, "your shoes are on the wrong feet."

I got dressed all over again. By the time I ate breakfast, my cereal was soggy. Then I stopped, as usual, for Bill. He was not home. He had already gone to school. I walked there alone.

When I got to school, Bill yelled, "Here comes Sam, the snail."

14 Why was Sam so slow in getting to school?

- ⬭ He overslept.
- ⬭ He had to get dressed twice.
- ⬭ He fooled around.
- ⬭ He did not like school.

Most of the children with whom this question was discussed said "Sam was fooling around." A few children said "He probably didn't like school; that's why he was fooling around and his friends called him a snail."

The correct answer is: **He had to get dressed twice.**

If the children's experiences are different from those of the test makers, questions like those above will be difficult to answer correctly. Such questions are unfair because they really ask for an opinion, and an opinion **cannot** be "right" or "wrong". While some children share the test makers' opinions, some do not.

ARE THOSE THAT DO NOT POOR READERS?

Ants are found in almost all parts of the world, and they are the most common insects on earth. Although many ants are hard workers, others do
★ no work at all. One kind of ant that does not work is the Amazon ant. Amazon ants are fierce fighters, but they cannot dig their own nests or even feed themselves. They actually have slaves to do these things for them. The slaves, another kind of ant, are captured in battle by the Amazons.

You can suppose that without slaves Amazon ants would —

(a) go to work
(b) run away
(c) make nests
(d) die

According to legend, there were people known as Amazons. They probably —

(a) were warriors
(b) couldn't feed themselves
(c) were strong workers
(d) were found in all parts of the world

Do the tests require special knowledge?

These tests are given to your children to find out if they can read . . . Not to determine if they know about specific topics or have learned particular facts. Yet, finding the answer to the first question here requires scientific knowledge.

Many children who read well would answer by saying that ants, like people, would soon learn to go to work if they didn't have slaves. However, the correct answer is **die.**

For the second question, where we are meant to assume that ants **are** like people, several of the answers seem equally sensible, unless the child **already** knows that the Amazons of ancient legend were warriors.

A cinder is a piece of . . . . . ☐ rock ☐ sand ☐ fire brick ☐ burned coal

Are **you** sure what a cinder is? If you're not, does it mean you can't read?

The 8 year old who reads this easily may, indeed, have difficulty with the math required.

In 1877 a machine appeared which surprised many people. Can you guess the name of this strange new machine?

As you spoke into the mouthpiece and turned the handle, a tube covered with a thin piece of tin moved around. As the tube moved, a needle pressed deep lines into the tin. As you turned the handle once more, the needle touched against the same lines and played back your words.

This was the first phonograph! How different from the hi-fi of today!

About how many years ago did the machine first appear?

(1) 25 (2) 50 (3) 100 (4) 200

The three test items above require special knowledge of history, math or science. These items do not test reading, but give an advantage to a child who is lucky enough to know these facts which are not a part of the 3rd grade curriculum in most schools.

STEPS TO FOLLOW (Questions 1-25)

I. Look at each line. Part of each first word is underlined. Decide what sound is represented by the underlined letter(s). One of the other four words has that same sound.

II. Choose the word that has the same sound.

5 b<u>o</u>xer ① buoy ② honest ③ power ④ aloud

7 <u>o</u>rder ① farther ② warm ③ rode ④ drove

I. Read each line. In some lines, three of the four syllables, when put together, will make a word. The other syllable is extra.

II. Find the *extra* syllable in each line where three syllables will make a word.

IV. Fill in the space that has the same number as the syllable you have chosen. If *no word* can be made, fill in the space marked N.

35 1 num 2 tor 3 cal 4 i 35 ① ② ③ ④ Ⓝ

49 1 pha 2 al 3 tion 4 bet 49 ① ② ③ ④ Ⓝ

Are these study "skills" necessary for reading? Try the items.

REMEMBER: Under test conditions, you are not permitted to say any of the words out loud.

Many tests include items like these. It is possible for a good reader to fail this section or for a poor reader who has been drilled on such exercises to do well.

Many programs which produce good readers do not teach children these particular skills.

Regional variations in pronounciation could also confuse some good readers.

Do test makers' biases confuse children?

Perhaps you might understand how some children find this confusing if you were asked the following question?

A <u>neighborhood</u> is a ..... ① protection ② friendship ③ community ④ home

How would you describe your neighborhood? If your description differed from the answer the test makers had in mind, would this mean you couldn't read or had an insufficient vocabulary?

☐ The club meeting is at Mother's house, today.

☐ The party is over, and everyone is going home.

☐ All of these mothers have children in school.

One child said, "It can't be the first choice; I don't see **my** mother there."

Policemen are our friends. They help us to cross the street. They keep cars moving. Sometimes they scold people, but only when the people do something wrong. Everyone should obey policemen.

While some children might agree that policemen are their friends or that policemen "scold people, but only when the people do something wrong", there are other groups of children who do not share this view based on their life experience. Their response to this paragraph does not determine whether or how well they read. Is it fair to penalize them for their different beliefs?

Does the language and format confuse some children?

Many families live in the building. People often run into each other in the halls, and children play tag there. The stairs are crowded with grown-ups sitting and talking. Sara's family, all six of them, lives in the two-room apartment at the head of the stairs.

"Sometimes it doesn't bother me," Sara thought to herself. "But today I want to be alone. I want to reach out and feel some empty space. And I have some special thoughts that need to speak to me privately. Somewhere there must be a tiny piece of space that no one wants. If I could just find it, I'd only borrow it a little while."

Perhaps this passage in the CTBS, 3rd and 4th grade, test given in New York City was included in order to be "fair" to inner city children.

ARE THE ASSUMPTIONS APPROPRIATE?

IS THE WORDING FAMILIAR to innercity children or any others?

An architect's most important tools are his –

- (B) pencil and paper
- (I) buildings
- (S) ideas
- (T) bricks

Did this fool you? Did you select **pencil and paper** the way many children did? The "correct" answer is **ideas**.

Doesn't this question ask for judgment as much as for reading skill?

A paragraph like the one to the left is readable but confusing. Could you explain **place value** after reading about it here.

Will a child who can read this paragraph necessarily be able to understand it? Do you think most 8-year-olds can be expected to read and understand this?

Our system of numbering and counting was first used thousands of years ago in India. Known as the Arabic system, it was brought to Europe about the year 900. The Arabic system has ten characters, from 0 through 9; and it is based on the number 10. This means that there are ten ones in ten, ten tens in one hundred, and so forth. The zero was the last figure to be added to the system. It makes our use of place value in arithmetic possible.

Try the following tests; see how well you do. The first item appears on a test meant for 8-year-old-children. (College students have difficulty answering the questions!)

In some towns in Italy many Italian children help their parents on small farms located on dry or rocky hillsides. Many of these farms are poor, and nearly all are less than ten acres in size. Italian farming families may plant and harvest several crops on their small plots: wheat on the lower levels; then grapes, fruits, and nuts on higher slopes. Much of the work is done with centuries-old tools like the hoe, the sickle, and the plow, rather than with the tractors used on farms in the fertile river valleys.

Which tells most about this story?

- (E) Tractors are used in river valleys.
- (I) Italy has many farms and hills.
- (S) Wheat is Italy's main crop.
- (H) Farming in Italy can be hard work.

Italy's dry farmland is probably –

- (A) coastal
- (B) dusty
- (C) useless
- (D) swampy

Centuries-old means that the tools are –

- (E) valuable museum pieces
- (F) similar to those used years ago
- (G) so old that they are broken
- (H) not made anymore

Hillside farms are small because –

- (L) the government wants them small
- (I) tractors are not used
- (U) a family cannot tend more
- (M) there are several crops

This test item is intended for 7th grade children

Higher up the little creek, I encounter an abandoned farm. I try to read, from the age of the young jackpines marching across an open field, how long ago the luckless farmer found out that sand plains did not grow corn. Jackpines tell tall tales to the unwary, for they put on several whorls of branches each year, instead of only one. I find a better chronometer in an elm seedling that now blocks the barn door. Its rings date back to the drought of 1930. Since that year no man has carried milk out of this barn.

11 Why was the farm abandoned?

1 The farmer did not like to farm.
2 Corn does not grow well in sand.
3 Trees had crowded out the crops.
4 The farmer and his family died of a plague.

12 The author believes that counting growth rings on elm trees gives

5 their age incorrectly
6 their age almost exactly
7 their age within ten or twenty years
8 their age if the trees are hundreds of years old

13 A "tall tale" is a story that

1 is told about trees and farms
2 originated among lumberjacks
3 is extremely long and interesting
4 exaggerates the truth considerably

14 Which of the following best describes the author when he found the abandoned farm?

5 curious
6 unwary
7 unlucky
8 surprised

15 What is this story mainly about?

1 who owned the farm
2 where the drought occurred
3 why jackpine trees grew on the abandoned farm
4 how the author found the date of the drought

16 What is the best title for this story?

5 "The Young Pines"
6 "The Little Creek"
7 "The Tree's Story"
8 "The Marching Elm"

How many times did you have to read the passage in order to be able to answer the questions?

How would your comprehension stand up if you had to read and answer questions on 12 or more passages of this sort in a time period of approximately 35 minutes?

If you had problems, do you think it was your reading ability, the content, the questions, the directions, style or even the artificial testing situation?

DO YOU THINK YOU NEED REMEDIAL READING?

How your child does on these kinds of tests may tell us something, BUT NOT whether he or she knows how to read.

Effects of Standardized Tests on Children

Standardized tests, such as those described in this booklet, have many effects on children and schools:

1. They often determine children's future class placement and classification (slow, bright).
2. They put pressure on teachers to spend large portions of time coaching children for the tests—trying to outwit the test makers.
3. They affect the curriculum, the skills, and the values of the school, since teachers will often shape the school day to fit the tests, not the children.
4. Large sums of money are given to schools to improve their reading programs. The success of these programs is often determined by test scores.
5. Children judge themselves by how they do on the tests. They assume that test questions are what reading "is all about."
6. Parents, not having seen the tests, often judge their children by their test scores, too.

We think it's about time parents knew how these tests worked. It's time for YOU to judge for yourself what it means to be able to read.

It's time to decide whether YOU want the school to use standardized tests to judge your child.

We think IT'S TIME parents know how such tests are written and how they are given.

We think IT'S TIME that parents decide whether such tests are what schools should use to judge children.

We think IT'S TIME you and your child's teacher had access to more than a numbered "score" on tests. The tests themselves are not typically made available by the test makers for examination.

We think IT'S TIME you had access to the tests that determine so much of YOUR child's future . . . and that schools be prepared to tell parents exactly what each child did correctly and incorrectly on each test.

Additional Copies of this booklet:
Standardized Reading Tests: Do They Help or Hurt Your Child
are available from:

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- What Does that Score Mean
- How To Prepare Your Child
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